



RANTS & RAVES

While the nation's text-obsessives allow Mel Croucher to become the Invisible Man, Simon Brew worries that updates foisted on users by software companies are all too visible

TEXT-MANIAC



MEL CROUCHER RAVES

My friend Sharkey lives in Brick Lane, where London's East End used to be. He lives in a brick house with his brick of a wife and their baby briquette. I think their Swedish nanny is called Brick, although I may have misheard that. Anyway, she's as thick as a brick and spends her life either checking for text messages or sending them.

Her cold blue eyes never stray from her cold blue screen, even when she absent-mindedly offers

Sharkey Junior a BlackBerry to suck. She is a text-maniac. So are most people in Brick Lane. Sharkey and I go in search of a suitable pub, and almost everyone we pass is engrossed in the business of reading and writing text messages.

TEXT TO SUE

My friend Sharkey is a lawyer, and he tells me there is a huge increase in text-related litigation. This year, at least 68,000 people in the UK will suffer injuries while they text, and local authorities are getting more and more nervous about responsibility when these injuries happen on their patch. Sharkey

shows me a lamp-post where an engrossed text addict fractured a cheekbone, and another where a hapless goon bust their kneecap. Now he shows me a row of lamp-posts the council clad in cushions, like those giant spongy jackets wrapped around rugby posts. He says they are for text-maniacs to bounce off when they walk into them. If the scheme is a success, other councils will follow suit.

Sharkey thinks this is stupid. What next? Electronic beepers in dog food, to warn text-maniacs where the dog poo is? I cannot agree. I think text-mania is great. Let me tell you why.

While everyone else is permanently texting, I can live out my all-time favourite fantasy, which is that I am the Invisible Man. I can stick my tongue out at text-maniacs and waggle it with impunity, because I know they will ignore me. I can give them the finger knowing that they won't take any notice, because they are too engrossed in their digital intercourse to bother with the Invisible Man. I can sneak up and smack them round the head with a pig's bladder, and they won't even know it's me. They'll just think they've walked into another padded lamp-post. Better still, new technology not only gives me the freedom of invisibility, it also allows me to harness my favourite facial expression: the wink.

WINK WINK

Thanks to Japanese technology, a nod is no longer as good as a wink to a blind horse. The Kome-Kami device roughly translates as 'eyebrow switch', and it has been developed to act as the ultimate



remote control device for mobile phones, iPods and any other electronic device known to man, woman or text-maniac. The system uses a single-chip computer and a pair of infrared sensors small enough to fit into a baseball cap, a pair of specs or even an eyebrow piercing. It can tell a natural blink from a deliberate wink with 100 per cent accuracy. Closing both eyes gives the command to Start as well as Stop. A right-wink means Next and a left-wink means Back, with other combinations giving more complex instructions.

This is brilliant. I have already demonstrated how I can become invisible, and now I can also control objects just by looking at them. What's more, I have the ability to fly to any destination in the galaxy at the touch of a button. Of course I can, thanks to the new Sky button on Google Earth. All these text-maniacs don't realise who they have in their midst, I confess to Sharkey half-way through our third pint of London Pride. I'm a three-star superhero, I am.

WHO ARE YOU?



MEL CROUCHER
RANTS

It's Saturday 23rd November, 1963. I am a young man. Soft black hairs have sprouted above my upper lip. I am trying to grow my first moustache. My contemporaries have split into opposing factions of mods and rockers. I veer towards the rockers, but I'm keeping my options open. I am mocked by both mods and rockers because I ride a Hudson Villiers autocycle, which is neither fish nor fowl but smells like one and rides like the other. So this afternoon I will not go for a burn-up round Southsea funfair car park with the other teenage hoodlums, but I will watch television.

John Kennedy, the President of the USA, has been assassinated, and I want to see the latest news. But instead there's the first episode of a kids' show called *Doctor Who* on. It's OK. In fact, it's pretty good. But it is only when the credits appear that I know I will become a lifetime fan of the programme. I pledge my allegiance not because of the escapism, the acting or the story, but because of the first name of *Doctor Who*'s producer: Verity. I know the meaning of Verity because, before I became an apprentice-hells-angel on a moped, I was force-fed Latin at my all-male school. Verity. Verity. What a marvellous, aspirational name.

GIRLS ALLOWED

Near to my all-male school there is an all-female school, with a high wall and spiked railings to keep boys with hairs on their lips at bay. I imagine that all the girls in there are named Verity, or if not Verity then they are named after some other virtue. I wouldn't mind getting closer to any of these girls with their virtuous names such as Prudence, Constance, Hope, Felicity, Patience, Faith, Grace or Joy. But they only seem interested in boys named after crime, drugs or sex – like Nick, Charlie and Dick. Sometimes it's hard to be a Mel. But Mel's day will come. I just have to wait for the hippies to arrive.

By the time *Doctor Who* is in its fourth series, a luxuriant black moustache is riding my upper lip, and I am riding a 582cc BMW flat-twin motorbike as well as a number of women who are not named after virtues but after precious rocks. Thank you Ruby, Jade, Amber and Crystal, and please forgive me for my late arrivals, because I have been working after hours programming my first computer, which I name Verity in honour of my first true love.

I make no apologies for the Swinging Sixties or my personal behaviour at that time. I stand by everything I did and everything I campaigned for, and I think today's cynicism and materialism stink by comparison. It is fortunate that girls are no longer named after concepts valued by contemporary society or even precious stones; instead of being named after those traditional virtues and mineral extractions, they would now be named after new aspirations and tat, and be called Celebrity, Ego and Greed. As for the boys, they could all be named after the icons of our times: "Hey Fourbyfour, come downstairs, darling, your friend Satnav is here to see you."

HAIRY MOMENT

It is May Day 2008. Today, I find that the last remaining black hair in my moustache has jumped ship. It has dropped on to my keyboard and lodged between the F8 and F9 keys. It leaves behind a regiment of silver, grey and white bristles to remain on duty, doggedly patrolling my upper lip.

I capture the event through the tiny lens of the camera built-in to my all-time favourite computer, and I will consign the image to the eclectic archive of the times and places and events that have turned me into me so far. But some things never change. I am proud to say I am still faithful to my first true love. Ah yes, I always refer to the memory bank inside my computer as Verity. Her name means truth.

JUST SAY NO



SIMON BREW
RANTS

Adobe Reader has fresh updates available. Would I like Adobe Photoshop Album Starter Edition to be installed at the same time?

No.

Your download purchase is complete. Would you like to pay an extra £2 so that we can protect your registration information?

No.

You're about to download Safari, a web browser that's no better than the one you've got on your PC (and in many ways worse). Is that OK?

No. No, it isn't.

That's this week's batch. But as anyone who regularly has to install, reinstall, update or remove software can testify, it's the proverbial tip of the iceberg. From uninstallers deciding you need to be directed to a webpage to tell the publisher why you're getting rid of its shoddy software, through to unnecessary add-ons being thrust at you with

abandon, IT is an industry in which the stupid question with limited answers prevails.

POWER DOWN

Take CyberLink's PowerDVD suite, a software package I hold in some regard. When I load it, it asks me if I want to register now or later. But where's the button that says 'I'll never register a piece of software whose job is simply to play discs when I tell it to'? I couldn't find it anywhere, and I suspect you can't, either.

Questions such as this encompass a level of presumption that borders on the insulting, but it's nothing compared with the abuse of users' trust that automatic update systems are using right now. These are the routines that don't bother to ask you the stupid question at all, save for a tickbox or something of that ilk when you install the program. But when you do give a program permission to hunt down and apply essential updates without confirming with you every time, is it too much to ask that these updates are, well, essential?

Microsoft, for instance, foisted Internet Explorer 7 and its famed Windows Genuine Advantage utility on any user who left Automatic Updates unattended, whether you wanted a new web browser or security tool or not. As I use Firefox and a legal copy of Windows, why do I need either of these? I don't, but somewhere on a PowerPoint presentation in Microsoft HQ, there was once some smart-suited executive who decided that these were essential to me.

LIGHT RELIEF

It's unfair just to cite Microsoft. I was pleased to see, for instance, that its new Silverlight 1.0 plug-in was listed as an optional update, though I retain some discomfort about it being offered at all through a system designed to keep your operating system up to date.

Unfortunately, a growing number of software publishers are seeing it as the accepted norm that they can commandeer your internet connection, not for the purpose of legitimate updates, but to try to sell new things to you. This, along with the increasingly presumptive nature of dialog boxes, shows a worrying disdain – and a lack of respect – for the very people who fund these companies in the first place: the consumers.

Given that we stump up the money to keep these firms in business, is it too much to ask to have a dialog box that always has a No option in it somewhere? **CS**